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ABSTRACT

The creation of cluster colleges was in response to the serious problems facing undergraduate education: the impersonality of large institutions, the limited resources of small schools, and the irrelevance of academic programs. There are two types of cluster college: (1) a federation of usually small schools, with each college maintaining its corporate independence, and (2) the more common type: the subcollege, which is an academic subunit of a larger corporate body. This paper concludes that cluster colleges: (1) foster a greater sense of community and encourage closer student-faculty relationships than do larger and undifferentiated portions of the same school; (2) are vehicles for innovation both by virtue of their novel educational programs and because they attract faculty and students who are interested in and supportive of these efforts; and (3) provide the structured diversity and alternative programs that can meet the needs of a wide range of students better than a single, undifferentiated university. (AF)

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CLUSTER COLLEGES AS RESPONSE

JERRY G. GAFF

Cluster colleges are organizational innovations which attempt to meet some of the most serious problems facing undergraduate education, problems which first surfaced and then reached epidemic proportions during the 1960s. The impersonality of large institutions, the limited resources of small schools, the irrelevance of academic programs – these were some of the problems of the decade, and cluster colleges are responses to each of them.

There are two basic types of cluster college. One type is found in a federation of usually small schools. Each federated college maintains its corporate independence but shares its educational resources with geographically contiguous schools. Small schools typically suffer from limited intellectual, cultural, and economic resources, and proponents argue that a federation of colleges may create an institution which is larger, more diverse, and richer in academic and social resources than any of the individual colleges.

A second, more common type of cluster college is a subcollege. This type is an academic subunit of a larger corporate body. Lacking corporate independence, a subcollege, nonetheless, has a considerable amount of academic, fiscal, and social autonomy. It has its own academic program, a separate faculty, and its own identity. This kind of cluster college is said to offer a number of advantages to a large or growing institution.

First, the subcollege is one way of making an institution seem smaller while growing larger; advocates claim that a subcollege can create a closer community, offer more personalized instruction, and foster warmer student-faculty relationships than can the larger school. Second, a subcollege can provide the structured diversity, the alternative programs, which are more likely to meet the diverse needs of an increasing number of students. Third, a subcollege offers a mechanism whereby experimentation may be carried out on a limited scale. Because it occurs in a separate unit, it represents little risk to existing programs, and because it can tap into central services and facilities, comparatively little extra cost is involved. Furthermore, it is expected that the educational ferment in a subcollege may carry over into the main program and provoke educational reform elsewhere on the campus.

In their internal operations cluster colleges generally have attempted to remove the arbitrary barriers which have been erected in colleges and universities. They have focused upon breaking down the barriers between the different academic disciplines, between students, faculty and administrators, between the academic and social segments of students' lives, and between the campus and the community.

Consider a few efforts to bridge the disciplines. The Urban Studies College at Old Westbury places the disciplines in the context of social problems which know no disciplinary boundaries; by having students take one third of their work in the community and by holding workshop classes in the community setting, all disciplines become potentially relevant resources. A core curriculum made up primarily of interdisciplinary courses, some of which may be team-taught, is used in other colleges.

A number of colleges have tried to make evaluation of student achievement more effective. Many cluster colleges have abandoned traditional grading practices. At Kirkland College students are graded on the usual A-F basis, but they may not learn their grades until they graduate, transfer or otherwise sever relationships with the college. Fairhaven College at Western Washington State College grades all students on a pass-fail system. Bensalem College at Fordham University allows each student to evaluate himself against his own goals. Credits also have been abolished. In their place some schools have adopted a course system where a student takes three or four courses a term, each course carrying equal weight. Johnston College at Redlands University has devised an even more radical "contract plan." Each student with the help of an advisor plans his complete college program consisting of courses, independent study, fieldwork or any experience which may lead to his personal objectives. This plan is submitted to a larger faculty committee; once that committee approves, the plan becomes a binding contract between the student and the college. It may, of course, be modified during the student's career, but whenever the conditions of the contract are fulfilled, in perhaps three, four, or five years, the student graduates.

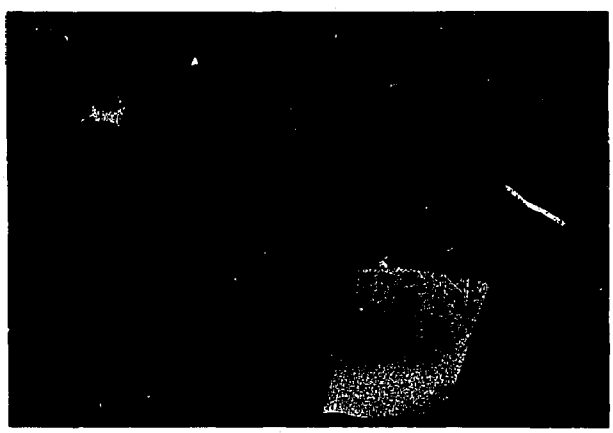
Cluster colleges have attempted to unite the "living" and "learning" components of a student's life. Their small size, typically residential character, common core curriculum, and flexible academic structures are all designed to help students make "connections" between their in-class, academic behavior and their out of class social behavior. Some colleges have deliberately tried to extend the range of the classroom to the entire campus by placing seminar classes, faculty offices, and even faculty residences in student dormitories. Cowell Col-

lege at Santa Cruz has instituted a weekly "college night" where members of the college gather for dinner and a cultural or intellectual program. In these and other ways cluster colleges attempt to harness the power of the student peer group and to direct it toward the educational purposes of the schools.

Some colleges have tried to overcome the division between campus and the community, in part by bringing the community to the campus and in part by taking the campus to the community. Students at Merrill College at Santa Cruz, for example, are expected to spend part of their academic program in fieldwork. Two schools at the University of the Pacific have perhaps made the most radical commitment to world education. Elbert Covell College has a Latin American thrust. Not only does it attract about half of its students from Central and South America, but it conducts all of its activities – including classes – in Spanish. At Callison College which emphasizes Asian studies, the entire sophomore class spend the year at an overseas campus in Bangalore, India.

These then are several strategies which cluster colleges have employed to make academic programs more relevant to the needs of students. How successful are cluster colleges? What do we know about how they operate? Since the cluster college movement is so young, little systematic research has been completed. But given the severity of problems facing higher education and the potential value of the solutions attempted by cluster colleges, even a tentative early assessment may be useful. Such an assessment has been made in *The Cluster College*, a collection of recent research papers which was published earlier this year.*

Paul Heist and John Bilorusky found that students who entered four different cluster colleges were consistently different in personality, values, attitudes, and educational philosophies from those who entered the more conventional programs of the same schools. In general, personality test profiles showed the cluster college students to be autonomous individuals, interested in ideas and social issues and eager to participate actively in their own education.*



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Warren Martin and Judith Wilkinson surveyed faculty at three universities and found that cluster college faculty, too, are a selective group. That is, they were more supportive of change and innovation, were more knowledgeable about their schools' educational objectives and philosophies, and knew more about specific innovations on other campuses. They were more likely than their colleagues in other parts of the same schools to define their jobs in larger institutional terms and less likely to define them in narrowly departmental terms.*

In a study conducted at the University of the Pacific using student-completed questionnaires about the college environment, Raymond College was perceived to have a radically different environment than that of the parent institution. The cluster college was characterized by students as emphasizing intellectual, humanistic, and socio-political interests and deemphasizing concern with practical matters. The cluster college also appeared, not unexpectedly, to have a greater sense of community spirit.

In general, the cluster colleges which have been studied have realized their major purposes. That is, they do foster a greater sense of community and encourage closer student-faculty relationships than do larger and undifferentiated portions of the same school. They are vehicles for innovation both by virtue of their novel educational programs and because they attract faculty and students who are interested in and supportive of these efforts. And the collegiate organization does provide the structured diversity and alternative programs which can better meet the needs of a wide range of students than can a single undifferentiated university.

When one takes an overview of the results and limitations of the available research, the cluster college concept does appear to be a promising mechanism by which undergraduate education can be made more relevant to the needs of students.

*Gaff, Jerry G. and Associates, *The cluster college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970.